



Stream Smallmouth

The best Kentucky has to offer

By Jeff Ross

Smallmouth bass are hard to beat when it comes to pure fighting ability and the thrill of the catch. Smallmouth bass are one of the state's most popular sport fish and every year anglers travel to lakes across the state in search of the elusive bronzeback.

However, the next time you travel Kentucky's roads and highways, pay particular attention to the bridges that you cross and the names of the streams running beneath them. You just might be passing over one of the state's best smallmouth streams.

Many of Kentucky's streams support excellent smallmouth fishing opportunities. Streams are an alternative to crowded reservoirs and can provide you with a secluded and peaceful fishing experience.

The trade-off is that smallmouth bass grow slower in streams than in reservoirs because of the energy they exert maintaining their position in the current. Even so, smallmouth over 18 inches long can be found in many of Kentucky's bet-

ter streams.

Kentucky has thousands of miles of fishable streams. So figuring out where to start can be daunting. That's where the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources can help.

Using field data and angler comments, fisheries biologists have identified more than 100 streams where you'll have the best chances of catching a smallmouth bass 12 inches or longer. Biologists also selected a few of the best smallmouth streams within five regions of Kentucky.

The list is based on fish populations, not public accessibility. Many of the streams listed are located on private land and you'll need permission from local landowners to access them. Potential fishing access areas will also be identified on some of the better smallmouth streams to respond to a lack of public access along most streams. This list is a constant work in progress and more streams will be added as information becomes available from field assessments.

These assessments help biologists better direct their management efforts to those streams in need of more attention.

Fishing tips

There are several ways to fish for smallmouth bass in streams. Depending on the stretch of stream you are fishing and available access, you have the option of wading or floating. Many smallmouth streams are shallow enough to wade throughout the year. Your wading gear might include shorts and an old pair of sneakers if it's warm, or waders and a pair of felt-soled wader boots if it's cold.

In some of the bigger streams, it is possible to float sections with a canoe, kayak, small boat or float tube, particularly during the spring and early summer months. Be careful of floating debris, log jams, other hazards, and always wear a life jacket if you're float fishing.

The type of rod and reel you use for stream smallmouth depends on the conditions and the type of lure or bait you



Cover painting by Rick Hill

intend to use. Both light action spinning and baitcasting outfits work well for casting and retrieving hard and soft plastic baits. Many smallmouth streams are clear, so lighter line such as 6-pound test helps when fish are finicky.

In addition, bigger isn't necessarily better when selecting smallmouth lures for stream fishing. Lures in the 2- to 4-inch range are effective. Widely used artificial lures for stream smallmouth include small crankbaits, spinnerbaits, spinners, floating and sinking minnows, plastic grubs and swimbaits. Stream smallmouth can also be caught on live bait such as hellgrammites (Dobsonfly larva), crayfish, worms, grasshoppers and crickets.

For a real challenge, try a fly rod. Fly-fishing can be effective for smallmouth and allows you to make a precise and natural looking presentation. Good flies include poppers, streamers and nymphs that imitate the natural food in the stream, such as insects, baitfish and crayfish.

No matter what method you use, understanding a few biological characteristics of the smallmouth will help you increase your catch.

Smallmouth biology

Smallmouth bass prefer streams with hard bottoms such as boulders, rubble, gravel or sand. They are structure-oriented and will hold close to vegetation, fallen trees, boulders and rock ledges.

Smallmouth use the structure as current breaks in the stream to conserve energy. They can sit in these low-flow areas and dart out to capture drifting or swimming food items. Pools immediately above or below shallow riffles can be good during the summer. Low water periods can also be productive times to fish.

Smallmouth like shade and actually use it as a form of cover. Locating boulders, rock ledges, fallen trees, or any other type of structure associated with shade will improve your chances

of catching a good smallmouth. Fishing in the early morning or late evening into darkness, especially in the summer, will also help since there is less direct sunlight during these times and feeding activity is greatest.

Peak feeding activity for smallmouth bass occurs at water temperatures around 78 degrees, which is during the middle of the summer. The majority of summer feeding will occur at sunrise and sunset. Once water temperatures fall below 50 degrees, feeding activity will decrease and smallmouth will locate in the deeper holes of the stream.

Spawning occurs when water temperatures reach 59 to 64 degrees in the spring. Stream smallmouth typically spawn in pools with gravel bottoms near riffles. While most spawning activity occurs in the main stem of a stream, adult smallmouth may also run up small tributaries to spawn.

Spawning success and survival of young smallmouth is highly dependent on stream flow. Typically, the highest



Ask First

All persons must obtain permission to enter private lands for any reason, including fishing. When stream fishing, be aware that stream bottoms in Kentucky are privately owned unless the stream flows through public property. You must have landowner permission to enter and wade streams on private property. Any person fishing on either public or private property shall not commit acts of depredation or cause damage to any property in any manner.



spawning success occurs during years of low spring stream flow.

Once the newly hatched fry leave the nest, they begin feeding on microscopic crustaceans called zooplankton. As the fish continue to grow, they switch to small terrestrial and aquatic insects. Eventually, they progress to larger food items including hellgrammites, crayfish and baitfish.

Stream management

Environmental conditions and human impacts are two of the most important influences on smallmouth bass populations. At times, these two factors alone can be so strong that the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources must step in and manage a particular population to maintain adequate numbers and sizes of fish.

Humans can directly impact smallmouth bass populations through angling, removal of in-stream and streamside habitat, pollution, mining, agricultural runoff, cattle grazing and urbanization. Since the smallmouth bass is a structure-oriented species, it is critical that streamside vegetation and woody debris within the stream be left undisturbed. Without this structure, the smallmouth cannot effectively feed or hide from predators. Environmental conditions affecting smallmouth bass populations include spring rainfall. In years with heavy spring rains, stream flow during and after the spawn will be high. This has a negative effect on the spawn and ultimately the survival of young fish. In this situation, a potential management option is to stock smallmouth in the stream in an attempt to replace some of the lost fish.

Research on the Elkhorn Creek in Franklin County indicates that stocking will not work in certain situations. The genetic makeup of the stocked fish,

Fly rods aren't just for trout. Flies that imitate hellgrammites, crayfish and baitfish are effective for stream smallmouth.

Smallmouth identification

The smallmouth bass belongs to the black bass family, which also includes the largemouth, spotted (Kentucky), and Coosa basses, as well as several other species.

The length of the jawbone and the lack of a pronounced lateral stripe along its side separates smallmouth bass from largemouth bass. Unlike the largemouth bass, the jawbone of the smallmouth bass does not extend past the eye.



Rick Hill illustration

The smallmouth bass is typically bronze colored with vertical bars on its side and horizontal bars radiating back from the eye. The smallmouth bass differs from the spotted bass in that it lacks a pronounced lateral stripe along its side, lacks rows of spots on the lower half of its body, and usually does not have a distinct tooth patch on its tongue.

their size when stocked, the time of year fish are added to the stream and environmental conditions can all affect the ultimate survival of stocked smallmouth bass. This means Kentucky Fish and Wildlife biologists must consider a variety of options for different streams.

Fisheries biologists are constantly collecting information about smallmouth streams across the state using electrofishing units, seines and angler creel surveys. Length, weight, catch and harvest information, as well as overall population trends help biologists identify potential problems.

Angling has a large impact on Kentucky's smallmouth fisheries. Inevitably, fishing pressure will increase as word spreads about the quality of the state's smallmouth fisheries. This will likely require specialized fishing regulations on certain smallmouth streams to keep the fish populations in balance.

Length and creel limit regulations

are the most common method of managing highly utilized smallmouth fisheries. The type of regulation depends on the fishing pressure, reproductive rates, growth, and mortality of the smallmouth population.

Streams with poor reproduction will most likely be managed with a minimum length limit that requires anglers to return all undersized fish.

Streams with high numbers of slow growing fish will be managed with a protective slot limit. This means anglers can only keep fish under a certain size or over a certain size. All fish in the mid-range, or "slot," must be returned to the water.

Slot limits allow anglers to thin out smaller fish while protecting fish in the slot range. With less competition for food from the smaller fish, this allows fish within the slot limit size to grow faster and reach the larger sizes sought by anglers. High minimum size limits,

protective slot limits, and catch-and-release of all smallmouth bass are options for creating a trophy fishery if conditions are just right.

Management of smallmouth fisheries is critical to their sustained use by Kentucky anglers. Successful management requires teamwork between anglers and Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. Complying with fishing regulations, participating in creel and angler surveys, and minimizing impacts on stream habitat will insure good fishing for generations.

Current and future research will help ensure that the angler's license fees are well spent when re-establishing or improving stream smallmouth populations and providing public fishing access.

Author Jeff Ross, a fisheries biologist, heads black bass research for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

Top Lures for Stream Smallmouth

Smallmouth bass in streams mainly eat crayfish, hellgrammites and small minnows. Along with night crawlers, these are your best options for live bait. Many stream anglers avoid the problem of keeping bait alive by using artificial lures instead. Your lures should imitate these food items.

Lures and the size line for smallmouth bass in streams must be smaller and lighter than those used for largemouth bass in lakes and ponds.

Soft plastics

These are the most versatile lures for stream smallmouth. Most stream smallmouth anglers work soft plastics on or near the bottom, but these lures may be swum at any depth. Good soft plastics for stream smallmouth bass include 3- to 5-inch finesse worms, lizards, single-tailed grubs, tubes, spider grubs and jerkbaits.

Subdued natural hues that imitate crayfish or minnows — such as watermelon red flake, watermelon seed, pumpkin seed, green pumpkin, motor oil, smoke, smoke pepper and black — are good colors to throw most of the time.

Use the lightest weight possible to allow the lure to tumble through the water like a dislodged crawfish or disoriented minnow. The weight should not be so heavy that your lure goes straight to the bottom like a cannon ball and sits there. One-eighth to 1/16-ounce jig heads work best most of the time for streams in Kentucky. In extremely low and clear water conditions, a 1/32-ounce jig head may be necessary. In high, muddy water, try jig heads up to 3/8-ounce to get lures in the strike zone.

Top-water lures

Top-water season starts in spring and doesn't end until late fall. Early fall is the best time to use these types of lures.

One of the most popular presentations is twitching a floating minnow lure on the surface, pulling it under then allowing the lure to flutter back to the top. Minnow lures also are effective when steadily retrieved just under the surface.

White buzzbaits and torpedo lures with propellers are deadly in the spring, or when worked early and late in the day during summer. In early fall, a cigar-shaped, top-water lure worked with a “walk the dog” retrieve elicits savage strikes that leave an angler shaking. At dusk and after dark in the warm months, nothing beats a black crawler like the Jitterbug.

Crankbaits/Spinnerbaits

Crankbaits attract aggressive fish and excel in muddy water conditions. The best dive from 3 to 6 feet deep, are less than 3 inches long and resemble crayfish. Some anglers prefer shallow running crankbaits with a squared lip to pick off the active fish in a hole.

Small 1/8-ounce white or chartreuse spinnerbaits are excellent lures for smallmouth bass in streams. Switch to a heavier spinnerbait if the stream is rolling with water the color of chocolate milk. In-line spinners work well in normal, clear water conditions.



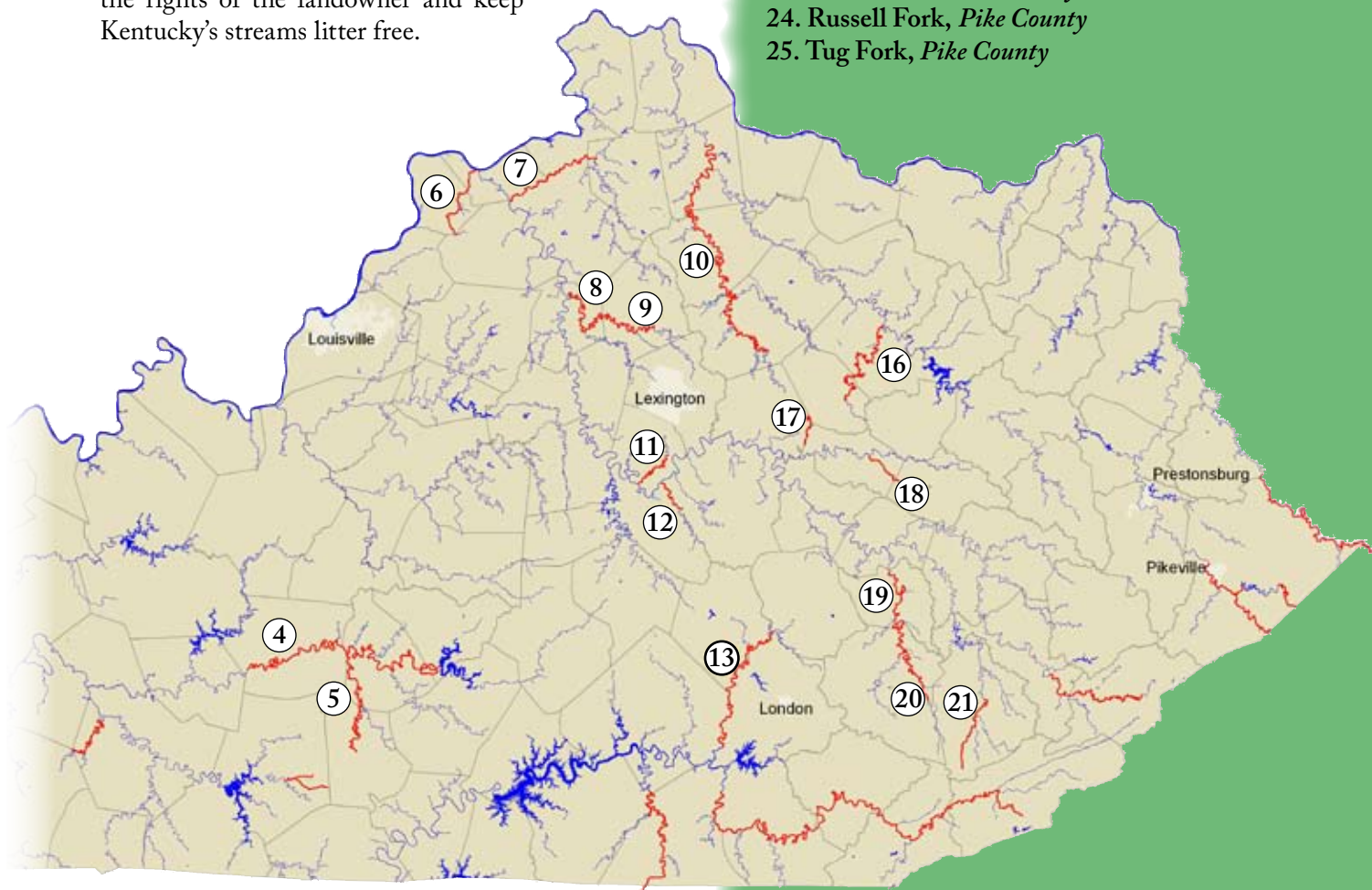
John A. Boone photo

25 Recommended Streams and Rivers

Most of Kentucky's smallmouth streams are located wholly or partially on private property, so you will need to obtain permission before fishing them. Landowners will be more apt to allow you access if you contact them in advance instead of the day that you want to go fishing, do not disturb the landscape, and pack out your trash. Some anglers even bring a plastic grocery sack with them so that they can pack out trash left by other anglers.

Bad experiences with anglers could result in landowners restricting access to streams and the loss of everyone's fishing opportunity. If you wish to fish on private land, please respect the rights of the landowner and keep Kentucky's streams litter free.

1. Gasper River, *Warren County*
2. Fallen Timber Creek, *Barren County*
3. Glover Creek, *Barren County*
4. Green River; *Green, Taylor counties*
5. Little Barren River, *Green County*
6. Little Kentucky River; *Carroll, Henry, Trimble counties*
7. Eagle Creek; *Carroll, Gallatin, Grant, Owen counties*
8. Elkhorn Creek (main stem), *Franklin County*
9. North Fork Elkhorn Creek; *Fayette, Franklin, Scott counties*
10. South Fork Licking River; *Bourbon, Harrison counties*
11. Hickman Creek, *Jessamine County*
12. Paint Lick Creek; *Garrard, Madison counties*
13. Rockcastle River; *Laurel, Pulaski, Rockcastle counties*
14. South Fork Cumberland River, *McCreary County*
15. Cumberland River; *Bell, Whitley counties*
16. Slate Creek; *Bath, Montgomery counties*
17. Lulbehrud Creek; *Clark, Montgomery, Powell counties*
18. Middle Fork Red River, *Powell County*
19. South Fork Kentucky River; *Clay, Owsley counties*
20. Redbird River, *Clay County*
21. Middle Fork Kentucky River, *Leslie County*
22. North Fork Kentucky River, *Letcher County*
23. Levisa Fork, *Pike County*
24. Russell Fork, *Pike County*
25. Tug Fork, *Pike County*



Smallmouth Streams in Kentucky

Stream	County	Miles	Floatable	Stream	County	Miles	Floatable
Barren River	Allen, Monroe	26.0	Yes	Little South Fork	McCreary	14.5	Yes
Beaver Creek	McCreary	2.2	No	Locust Creek	Bracken	6.6	Yes
Beaver Creek	Wayne	7.0	No	Long Creek	Allen	3.0	Yes
Beaver Creek	Barren	7.0	Yes	Lulbegrud Creek	Clark, Montgomery, Powell	17.0	No
Beech Fork	Nelson, Washington	51.7	Yes	Marrowbone Creek	Cumberland	19.0	No
Beech Fork	Leslie	11.4	No	Marsh Creek	McCreary	17.7	No
Benson Creek	Franklin	4.8	No	Martins Fork	Harlan	15.8	No
Big Pitman	Green	22.0	Yes	Meshach Creek	Monroe	6.0	No
Big South Fork	Marion	18.0	Yes	Middle Creek	Floyd	9.7	No
Bracken Creek	Bracken	12.4	Yes	Middle Fork Red River	Powell	9.0	Yes
Brashears Creek	Shelby, Spencer	25.9	Yes	Middle Fork Drakes Creek	Allen, Warren	21.0	Yes
Buck Creek	Pulaski	12.5	Yes	Middle Fork Kentucky River	Leslie	21.7	Yes
Chaplin River	Mercer, Nelson, Washington	79.3	Yes	Mill Creek	Monroe	9.0	No
Clear Creek	Woodford	6.0	No	Mudlick Creek	Boone	4.1	No
Clear Creek	Bell	3.5	Unknown	North Fork Kentucky River	Letcher	15.5	Yes
Clear Creek	Warren	6.0	Yes	North Fork Elkhorn	Fayette, Franklin, Scott	65.9	Yes
Clear Fork	Whitley	19.0	Yes	North Fork Triplett Creek	Rowan	6.7	Yes
Clover Fork	Harlan	18.0	No	Otter Creek	Madison	5.6	No
Crocus Creek	Cumberland	14.0	Yes	Paint Lick Creek	Garrard, Madison	22.0	No
Cumberland River	Bell, Harlan, Whitley	134.6	Yes	Peter Creek	Barren	6.0	Yes
Dix River	Garrard, Lincoln	60.0	Yes	Pinchgut Creek	Allen	6.0	Yes
Drakes Creek	Warren	23.0	Yes	Poor Fork	Harlan	15.8	No
Drennon Creek	Henry	4.9	Yes	Puncheon Creek	Allen	4.0	Yes
Eagle Creek	Carroll, Gallatin, Grant, Owen	40.7	Yes	Red River	Clark, Estill, Menifee, Powell, Wolfe	65.0	Yes
East Fork	Monroe	7.0	No	Red River	Logan, Simpson	33.0	Yes
Elkhorn Creek	Franklin	18.2	Yes	Redbird River	Clay	12.0	Yes
Elkhorn Creek	Pike	19.4	No	Right Fork Beaver Creek	Floyd, Knott	14.2	No
Fallen Timber Creek	Barren	6.0	Yes	Rockcastle River	Laurel, Pulaski, Rockcastle	45.0	Yes
Fleming Creek	Fleming, Nicholas	20.0	Unknown	Rockhouse Creek	Letcher	21.4	No
Floyds Fork	Bullitt, Jefferson	35.2	Yes	Rolling Fork	Hardin, Larue, Marion, Nelson	46.0	Yes
Gaspar River	Warren	21.0	Yes	Russell Creek	Adair, Green	54.0	Yes
Glover Creek	Barren	6.0	No	Russell Fork	Pike	16.2	Yes
Grassy Creek	Lewis	2.6	Unknown	Salt Lick Creek	Monroe	5.0	No
Greasy Creek	Harlan, Leslie	22.6	No	Salt River	Anderson, Bullitt, Spencer	46.0	Yes
Green River	Adair, Green, Taylor	84.0	Yes	Severn Creek	Owen	3.0	Yes
Gunpowder Creek	Boone	11.4	No	Silver Creek	Madison	21.5	No
Hanging Fork	Boyle	15.9	Yes/No	Sixmile Creek	Henry	8.0	Yes
Harrods Creek	Oldham	6.0	Yes	Skaggs Creek	Barren	19.0	Yes
Hickman Creek	Jessamine	9.0	Yes	Slate Creek	Bath, Montgomery	36.0	Yes
Hinkston Creek	Bourbon	12.0	Yes	South Elkhorn	Fayette, Franklin, Woodford	20.0	Yes
Hungry Creek	Allen	3.0	Yes	South Fork of Cumberland	McCreary	14.5	Yes
Illwill Creek	Clinton	3.0	No	South Fork Licking	Bourbon, Harrison, Pendleton	65.8	Yes
Indian Creek	McCreary	4.5	No	South Fork of Kentucky	Clay, Owsley	31.0	Yes
Kinniconick Creek	Lewis	38.0	Yes	Spring Creek	Clinton	4.5	No
Knox Creek	Pike	7.9	No	Stoner Creek	Bourbon, Clark	55.0	Yes
Laurel Creek	McCreary	3.5	No	Sulphur Creek	Adair	13.0	No
Laurel Fork	Lewis	9.6	Yes	Sulphur Fork	Allen, Simpson	18.0	No
Left Fork Beaver Creek	Floyd	10.8	No	Thompson Creek	Mercer	5.0	No
Levisa Fork River	Pike	126.0	Yes	Trammel Creek	Allen, Warren	32.0	Yes
Licking River	Bracken, Harrison, Nicholas, Pendleton, Robertson	97.2	Yes	Triplett Creek	Rowan	15.0	Yes
Line Creek	Monroe	7.0	No	Tug Fork River	Pike	65.0	Yes
Line Fork	Letcher	21.5	No	Tygart's Creek	Carter, Greenup	33.5	Yes
Little Barren River	Green, Metcalfe	28.0	Yes	West Fork	Simpson, Warren	24.0	Yes
Little Kentucky River	Carroll, Henry, Trimble	18.4	No	Woolper Creek	Boone	4.4	No

Indicates the 25 recommended smallmouth bass streams

